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Gender and the Player Cyborg: Ideological Representation and Construction in Online Games

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Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of the ideological implications of the dynamic representational processes in online games, particularly MMORPG such as the massively popular *World of Warcraft*. In online multiplayer games, there is room for an extensive amount of user-created content working within the larger frame provided by the game design. However, games still set up a framework of indispensable rules and conditions, and studying these can help point out the underlying ideological constructions inherent in games that are challenged, reproduced or modified in the process of user creativity. Specifically, I am interested in the construction of gender that arises in this meeting (both in the sense of collaboration and of confrontation) between the game as designed structure and the player/user, and I propose using the cyborg image or “myth” as presented by Donna Haraway (Haraway, 1991) to shed light on the dynamics and theoretical implications of the complex of player, game and gender identity.

Keywords

Games, gender, avatar, cyborg, representation, identity, ideology

1. Introduction

This paper offers an analysis and theoretical discussion of the ideological implications of the dynamic processes of gender representation in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG). The main focus of this paper is the theoretical discussion of ideological representation in games and experimentation with conceptual approaches in regards to gender representation and identity formation in games. What I am presenting here is work-in-progress and is therefore not a comprehensive study of the subject.

The technical potential for developing games that can give the online player an increasingly realistic experience – in the sense that the graphic interface lets the player experience the simulation as almost real – makes the attention to the formal construction of games even more important, since realistic effects in computer games typically leads the player to experience the formal level as ‘transparent’ and ideologically neutral. In a sense, MMORPG thus present realistic worlds (even a fantasy-based game like *World of Warcraft*) for the player to enter and interact with, and it is this dynamic relationship between the player and the gameworld that I wish to analyze here.

Simulation is a key concept in the context of representation in computer games and concerns the creative interaction between player and game, and I argue that simulation as a practice in computer games can also be studied as a dynamic model of representation. The relationship between the representation as found in the game’s structural form and the possibility of the player to act creatively both in-game and outside the game is therefore at the core of my analysis. Within the

frame and space of the game, the player can move freely, creating his/her own goals, networks and narratives. And in an online multiplayer game, there is room for an extensive amount of user-created content (such as narratives, value systems and social networks) working within the larger frame provided by the game design.

In spite of the apparent openness and customizability, online simulation games still set up a framework of indispensable rules and conditions, and studying these can help point out the underlying ideological constructions inherent in games that are challenged, reproduced or modified in the process of user creativity. Specifically, I am interested in the construction of gender that arises in this meeting (both in the sense of collaboration and of confrontation) between the game as designed structure and the player/user. I propose using the cyborg image or “myth” as presented by Donna Haraway (Haraway, 1991) to shed light on the dynamics and theoretical implications of the complex of player, game and gender identity.

2. Games as representative and ideological form

2.1 Representation in games

My approach to computer games is formed by my background in comparative literature and contemporary literary theory, but I fully acknowledge that literary theory cannot and should not be simply and exclusively applied in the study of computer games. But it seems clear that computer games can be seen as aesthetical and cultural objects and therefore also as sign complexes and representations. This means that games are part of a greater cultural complex in the way that art in general expresses views, values, commentary, satire etc. about its cultural context. Therefore, I look at games as representative and ideological forms, drawing on both literary theory and cultural studies in general and, of course, the already rich field of computer games research. As Barry Atkins writes: “There is something new here, (...) but it is not a new phenomenon that is ahistorical in its form or its reference. The game-fiction has not sprung fully formed from the depths of the machine, and the search for a radical break from previous modes of representation is likely to be futile” (Atkins 2005, p. 19).

The question of the role of narrativity in computer games has been widely discussed within game research (see for instance Aarseth 1997, Juul 2001 and Frasca 2003). It seems clear that it is problematic to study games exclusively as narrative, or to apply a strictly narratological approach to studying games, but it is also possible that denying that narrativity takes place in computer games implies a very narrow definition of what narrativity is. If we understand narrativity in a broad sense as a process by which meaning is continuously formed, it can be said to apply to games as well as other art forms. Marie-Laure Ryan writes, “The inability of literary narratology to account for the experience of games does not mean that we should throw away the concept of narrative in ludology” (Ryan 2001), and it is exactly this connection between narrative and experience that I find important. Narrative *happens*, so to speak, in games, in a greater extent than it exists or is told, and it happens by way of the player’s actions and experience in relation to the game.

2.2 Play, participation and creation

When playing computer games in general, the player interacts with the game as designed structure. The relationship between the representation as found in the game’s structural form and the possibility of the player to act creatively both in-game and outside the game is the core of my analysis. Theoretically, I am inspired by the concept of dynamic mimesis as developed by French

philosopher Paul Ricoeur in his famous work *Temps et récit* (1983-85). Ricoeur argues that mimesis is not the same as a static reference to reality, but rather an interpretative, dynamic process (Ricoeur 1983). Mimesis is understood as a configuration in fictive terms of something already pre-figured in the life experience of the reader, and becomes an active reconfiguration of the reality of the text interacting with the reality of the reader.

Ricoeur's points about the interpretative and active participation of the reader in the configuration of the meaning of a literary text fits well with the concept of simulation, which plays a vital role in the context of representation in games. Simulation indicates a dynamic process rather than a fixed image, and in my opinion, simulation can be considered a representation if representation is understood broadly as a mimetic practice communicating something about the world we live in through signs. Within the representative frame of a game, the player participates in a creative process of sense-making. In the case of online multiplayer games, this creative process is further enhanced and complicated by the play of identities and social exchanges that are specific for such games.

3. Identities in play

3.1 Identity and gender in online gaming

The question of the relationship between player and game and the ways in which representation comes about and narratives are constructed from this relationship brings me to focus on the formation and representation of identity in online games. Characters or, in an MMORPG context, avatars constitute the central point where game and player come together through a radical form of identification, in the sense that not only does the player identify (at least in a functional way) with a character (or several characters) acting in the game, the player actually controls and creates this character – but within the conditions set up by the game, of course. In other words, “avatars are crucial in producing a sense of presence, of ‘worldness’” (Taylor 2006, p. 117).

In his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003), James Paul Gee works to throw light on the play with identities in role-playing games by defining three different identities at stake: First, there is the virtual identity, which is the player's character with its specific attributes and limitations. Secondly, there is the real-world identity, the player as the off-line, corporeal person playing the game in real time, and thirdly – and most importantly – is the projective identity, which indicates two meanings of the word projective: it means both to project values and desires onto the character and “seeing the virtual character as one's own project in the making” (Gee 2003, p. 55). According to Gee, players often feel a great responsibility towards this projective identity: “[I]n my projective identity – [the virtual character] as my project – I am attributing feelings and motives to [the virtual character] that go beyond the confines of the game world and enter the realm of a world of my own creation” (Gee 2003, p. 57f).

This projective identity thus constitutes the meeting point between the virtual and the real-world identity, and is therefore also a meeting or an exchange of values. As Gee writes: “Players are projecting an identity onto their virtual character based both on their own values and on what the game has taught them about what such a character should or might be and become” (Gee 2003, p. 58). Gee's concept of the projective identity is very helpful in the process of trying to define identity constructions in games, but suffers from the fact that he does not study an online game (but rather the single player role-playing game *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura* from

2001) and therefore does not take into account the social aspect of identity, which is central in an online context.

This subject is, however, taken up by T.L. Taylor in her book *Play Between Worlds – Exploring Online Game Culture* (2006), an ethnographical and sociological study of online gaming (particularly the MMORPG EverQuest launched in 1999). She points out that avatars not only represent people in online games, they “influence and propel the formation of identity and relationships” (Taylor 2006, p. 96), and they “are central to both immersion and the construction of community in virtual spaces” (Taylor 2006, p. 110). According to Taylor, the boundary between offline and online identities are more blurry in non-game virtual worlds than in MMORPG, especially because of the latter’s “gameness” – but still, she writes, “avatars continue to present themselves as evocative vehicles for identity” (Taylor 2006, p. 97).

MMORPG allows the player to experiment with different identities, e.g. playing characters with opposite gender, personalities and such, and according to Taylor, there is a long tradition of this in online game culture. James Paul Gee only touches briefly on the gender issue, but he does demonstrate the transgressive potentials of role-playing games via examples of his personal gaming experience as female characters. Taylor represents a critical perspective on the partiality and limits in the figuration of gender in online games, especially when it comes to avatars, where she has found that “women in [EverQuest] often struggle with the conflicting meanings around their avatars, feeling they have to “bracket” or ignore how they look” (Taylor 2006, p. 110) – meaning that female avatars in online games such as *EverQuest* or *World of Warcraft* are presented with sexualized and scantily dressed bodies. Also, popular discourse surrounding the games such as advertising tends to frame a specific, gender-partial use of these games.

However, within these limitations set up by the game design, MMORPG “remain a space for creating and performing a variety of identities” (Taylor 2006, p. 95), and Taylor emphasizes the empowering aspects of online role-playing gaming. Taylor writes: “Identity is formulated on relation to formal play elements within the world such that active engagement, embodied agency, and full participation are guiding values for men and women alike. This is a potentially radical framework and one that can challenge stereotypical forms of femininity” (Taylor 2006, p. 97). Male and female avatars act in the game world on equal terms, and it is common for both men and women to ‘brag’ about their in-game achievements in the game community, e.g. via fan-art and signatures. Not only can women participate in the game, they have the opportunity to exert power and authority based on their exploits through the avatar: “When we play we negotiate a duality of presence (between the offline and the game world), and as we gain embodied competency over our avatars, we come to experience a satisfaction reminiscent of what is felt when we master a sport or embodied activities in corporeal space” (Taylor 2006, p. 109). This is a very interesting point, and I would like to explore this “duality of presence” in the gaming situation further by exposing it to Donna Haraway’s famous image of the cyborg as the breaking down of boundaries between humans and machines, and of gender dichotomies and restrictions.

3.2 The cyborg player?

Donna Haraway’s essay *A Cyborg Manifesto* was written in 1986, but revised and included as a chapter in the book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women – The Reinvention of Nature* (1991). Here, she proposes the image of the cyborg in describing the blurring of boundaries between human and machine, and she is making “an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for re-

sponsibility in their construction" (Haraway 1991, p. 150), using the cyborg image "to build an ironic political myth" applauding the breakdown of dualities of gender, physical-nonphysical, human-animal and human-technology. The feminist perspective is the central motivation for Haraway's essay, especially the 'manifesto' aspect of it, although the text has a wider philosophical and techno-social aim.

Haraway goes against the essentialist tendency in the feminist movements of the time of writing, which seemed to advocate a discourse or a dream of some sort of natural, original state which has been corrupted. She is critical of the idea of a natural female identity or unity: "There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices" (Haraway 1991, p. 155). Instead, she argues for the idea that the technological pervasiveness of our life and world today (the "cyborg world") offers an opportunity to form unities based on affinities rather than identity: "... a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway 1991, p. 154).

The partial, fractured identities that Haraway speaks of could be related to the play with identities happening in online role-playing games. Haraway herself did not have the foresight in her essay to recognize games as a form of liberating cyborg practice, but mentions only that "video games [are] heavily orientated to individual competition and extraterrestrial warfare" (Haraway 1991, p. 168), but it seems that the practice of gaming, especially in an MMORPG context, but possibly in games in general, offers new possibilities for reformulating and playing with gender identities. The gamer as simultaneously avatar acting in the gameworld, player sitting by her computer and perhaps being part of an (both online and offline) community around the game can perhaps be characterized as a cyborg. I mean this in the sense that in using avatars to act in a virtual environment corresponds to the cyborg's "disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (Haraway 1991, p. 163), because the player-avatar is an example of holding multiple (and therefore partial) identities at once in a changing context influenced by social practices.

4. Concluding remarks

As I have already mentioned above, this paper is to be seen as an attempt at a theoretical foregrounding of a more extensive study of gender representation and identity in online games, and also it is meant as an invitation to discuss and expand on the subject. Further study should both include a deeper-reaching theoretical perspective, where theories of cyborg metaphor, game aesthetics, social practices and mimetic representation are bound together, and a thorough ethnographical investigation into the practices of online gaming.

Finally, I want to point out that while this paper deals mostly with the empowering effects made possible by online gaming in regards to constructions and identities of gender, I am aware that, focusing on this subject, I am leaving out at least two other perspectives: Firstly, that the play with identities not only concerns gender, but has many other implications, and secondly, that there are many problematic issues surrounding gender and sexuality representation in games, and that these should certainly also be addressed.

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